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ABSTRACT

A national survey examined how United States newspaper editors responded to the 6 major issues surrounding the New World Information Order (NWIO) debate at the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) regarding the form and content of news flow at the international level. A 6-page questionnaire was completed by editors, managing editors, or foreign news editors at 279 newspapers (for a 51.7% response rate). Results indicated that most United States newspaper editors firmly opposed the demands that might alter the free flow structure of news traffic among countries, or that could compromise the independence of the American press free from external interference in the international communication arena. They were, however, more receptive to criticism concerning the technical deficiency of American news media coverage of foreign countries. The editors' responses to NWIO issues appeared to be a function of their professional training and political ideology. Those editors who were liberal, with better foreign language training, tended to be more sympathetic to the demand for an equal and balanced news flow. (Two tables of data and 38 references are attached.) (SR)

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U.S. Gatekeepers and the New World Information Order: Journalistic Qualities and Their Impact

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U.S. Gatekeepers and the New World Information Order:

Journalistic Qualities and Their Impact

Abstract

In a national survey, this study examined how U.S. newspaper editors responded to the issues surrounding the New World Information Order debate at Unesco regarding the form and content of news flow at the international level. The findings indicate that most U.S. newspaper editors firmly opposed the demands that might alter the free flow structure of news traffic among countries, or that could compromise the independence of the American press free from external interference in the international communication arena. They were, however, more receptive to the criticism concerning the technical deficiency of American news media coverage of foreign countries. The editors' responses to the NWIO issues appeared to be a function of their professional training and political ideology. Those editors who were liberal with better foreign language training tended to be more sympathetic to the demand for an equal and balanced news flow.

U.S. Gatekeepers and the New World Information Order: Journalistic Qualities and Their Impact

Despite pleas from many foreign countries and domestic scientific community to stay in the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (Unesco), the United States withdrew in January 1985 from that international body and has not returned since. The Reagan administration defended its decision as a protest against what it called Unesco's bureaucratic inefficiency, politicization, and autocratic governing system (New York Times, December 20, 1984). At the heart was the Unesco's involvement in the movement for a New World Information Order (NWIO) that the United States considered to be a threat to the free flow of information (e.g., Roach, 1987).

The U.S. official position, while being criticized as unfounded (e.g., Herman, 1988), has since continued to receive strong endorsement from major newspapers in the country (e.g., Riffe & Mohamed, 1990) in that the issues raised by the NWIO are characterized only as "freedom of the press" versus "government control of the media" (e.g., New York Times, October 25, 1987; Washington Post, February 21, 1989). Following the U.S. withdrawal and the subsequent departure of Great Britain as well as the change of leadership at Unesco, the debate over the new order appears to have subsided and no plans now exist at the world organization (Washington Post, February 25, 1989). There are, however, some speculations that a second wave of support for the NWIO may be in the making, largely because the imbalances of

news and TV programming flow between the Western industrialized countries and the developing and underdeveloped nations have persisted and even become exacerbated (e.g., Roach, 1990).

Since the NWIO debate started in the mid-1970s, researchers have found that there are indeed continued imbalances and biases in the news flow within and among the various regions of the world (e.g., Adams, 1986; Gerbner and Marvanyi, 1977; Kaplan, 1979; Larson, 1979; McAnany, Larson & Storey, 1982; Mishra, 1979; Peterson, 1980; Potter, 1987; Roach, 1990; Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1984; but cf., Gaddy and Tanjong, 1986; Hague, 1983; Riffe and Shaw, 1982; Stevenson and Cole, 1984; Weaver and Wilhoit, 1981; Wilhoit and Weaver, 1983). Because of the American domination in the international communication arena, U.S. news media have long been singled out for criticism by proponents of the new order as being biased and imbalanced in their coverage of foreign news. There is ample evidence to substantiate such accusations. Less clear is how those most responsible for the selection and production of foreign news in the United States, especially the editors, view the issues that have become the thrust of the demands for a new order. If results from previous content analyses are any indication of the less than perfect parity in the quantity and quality of news exchanges across national borders, it then becomes important to look at how journalistic qualities such as professional experience and political orientation may exert some influence on the outcome of international communication flow.

The purpose of this paper is to determine how American newspaper editors responded to the major issues involved in the NWIO debate and what influenced their attitudes towards the issues. Specifically, the paper attempts to answer the following questions related to media organizational self-interest: How did newspaper editors across the country evaluate the issues often raised in the new order debate concerning the form and content of international news flow? What were the factors at the individual, organizational, and social level that might affect their responses to the issues?

Answers to the above questions are critical in our understanding of why the American newspapers had reacted the way they did during the late 1970s and early 1980s that might have contributed to the U.S. withdrawal from the Unesco. They should also shed light on how the news media in general may respond to the revival of the NWIO movement on the international communication agenda, if it ever surfaces again.

U.S. News Media and Unesco

According to Raskin (1981), in the heyday of the NWIO debate in the 1980 Unesco conference at Belgrade, the American press had not been evenhanded in informing the readers of the developments regarding the depth and scope of dissatisfaction with existing international press practice among developing countries. In a study of 448 news clippings and 206 editorials from newspapers around the country, for example, Raskin found that not a single

story dealt with any of Unesco's basic activities in educational and scientific efforts.

By contrast, Raskin (1981, p. 166) noted, "without exception, the editorials expressed apprehension about UNESCO's involvement in attempts to establish policy in matters affecting the worldwide flow of information" and "the news events that got the widest press use and the greatest prominence tended to be those that reinforced the fears expressed on editorials pages." Riffe and Mohamed (1990) also reported that in 14 prestige American newspapers, editorial position on U.S. withdrawal from Unesco was significantly associated with direction of news coverage: more pro-withdrawal papers published more "bad news" about Unesco. Raskin (1981, p. 173) argued that such a disparity in presentation and interpretation was due in part to "the tendency of gatekeepers at the foreign desks in newspapers at home to discard stories that did not highlight the conflict angle."

In the most comprehensive study of this kind, Giffard (1989, p. 276) indicated that U.S. press coverage of Unesco "dealt with political issues, with little or no reference to the educational, scientific or cultural losses the United States might suffer if it withdrew, and even less attention to the impact of the pullout on developing countries." He believed the NWIO movement was doomed to fail from its beginning and the U.S. withdrawal from Unesco was inevitable primarily because the latter had offended the Ameican press through the debate over the years.

The above studies clearly implied that American newspaper gatekeepers were determined to focus mainly on the political aspect related to the NWIO debate since its inception. Surprisingly, no studies were made over the years of U.S. editors' perceptions of issues involved in the new order movement at Unesco. Although results from content analyses are useful indicators (e.g., Giffard, 1989; Herman, 1989; Riffe & Mohamed, 1990), little is known about American journalists' assessment of NWIO developments and the factors that may play a part in their thinking. This paper aims to fill in the gap by providing results from a national survey of American newspaper editors with regard to their views on some major issues that have been considered significant and important in the NWIO debate.

The gatekeeping studies (e.g., White, 1950; Gaudino, 1988; Harmon, 1989) indicate that the way editors perceive the world events has an impact on the degree of accepting news stories they receive daily. As part of their journalistic paradigms, Rothman and Lichter (1984, p. 47) argued, editors' perception of the world helps "filter reality for the rest of the society." Moreover, Cohen (1963) pointed out that for most people the political map of the world is drawn by reporters and editors, not cartographers.

How editors sketch the world map could have important policy implications for a democratic society. As Peterson (1979, p. 116) put it, "If newsmen share a pattern of preferences as to what is newsworthy, and that pattern does not represent reality, they will present a distorted image of the world which may

contribute inappropriate decisions and policies." In the news reporting of the NWIO debate at Unesco, this appears to be the case. According to Giffard (1989, p. 277), as far as the U.S. withdrawal from Unesco was concerned, "the Reagan administration could proceed with a cherished neo-conservative initiative secure in the knowledge that its flank was protected from carping critics in the press." Indeed, it was.

Based on previous findings (e.g., Giffard, 1989; Herman, 1988; Raskin, 1981; Riffe & Mohamed, 1990), a hypothesis of the study is that U.S. newspaper editors would be most likely to oppose the ideas and demands raised in the NWIO debate that could, if materialized, impinge on the current practice (e.g., no external restrictions on newsgathering activities) and the existing communication structure (e.g., free flow) of American journalism at the international level. Furthermore, their responses to the NWIO proposals were expected to be a function of journalistic qualities, such as professional training and political ideology. The assumption is that the practices and end results of the technical aspects of journalism certainly cannot be separated from a broader social and political context (Lee, 1989).

The qualitative aspects, whether individual or collective, in which journalists find themselves at work therefore need to be taken into consideration if the imbalances of international news flow and their explanations are to be fully understood. As part of the newsgathering and producing process, the experience editors bring to work, their political orientation, and market

and organizational characteristics of the newspapers have been found to be important factors shaping the outcome of news work (e.g., Gans, 1979; Lacy, 1987; Tuchman, 1973; Weaver and Wilhoit, 1986). In a related study of African newspaper editors' views about the NWIO, Roser and Brown (1986, p. 121) also provided some limited evience that "economic and political factors within the editor's own newspaper and country were the strongest predictors of professional attitudes" toward the new order.

Given the political ramifications, whether explicit or implicit, of the NWIO movement and the structural symbiotic relationship between the press and the government in the United States, there is reason to believe that American newspaper editors' views of the issues would echo the U.S. official line by displaying their opposition to any demands that might place restrictions on the "free flow of news." First, the restructuring of international news flow, as prescribed by the new order movement, runs counter to the core belief of American journalism against potential government intervention in news. Second, professional assumptions of American journalists are deeply rooted in mainstream U.S. ideology (e.g., Gans, 1979), especially when national interest is at stake overseas (e.g., Herman, 1985).

As such, editors' objections to the NWIO issues could be expected to focus more on the proposals to control the form of news flow at the international level than on the criticism of domestic coverage of foreign news. To be specific, editors would be more adamant in disapproving the attempt to establish an

international body to direct the news traffic across national boundaries, but more receptive to charges against negative portrayal of foreign countries. The former represents a redefinition of the rules of the game in international communication as a result of ideological conflicts between the United States and proponents of the new order, while the latter dwells on technical aspects of media performance manifest in the content that is unlikely to threaten the American status quo abroad.

Methods

A national sample of 540 daily newspapers proportionate to their circulation was randomly selected from the 1987 Editor & Publisher International Yearbook, representing 33 percent of the total population. Between mid-December 1987 and early March 1988, the top editor (either editor or managing editor) or foreign news editor (if there was one) at each newspaper received a six-page questionnaire composed mostly of multiple-choice questions. The three mailings yielded 279 respondents for a response rate of 51.7 percent.

Based on previous studies (e.g., Roser and Brown, 1986), the questionnaire asked the editors, among other things, whether they agreed or disagreed with each of the following six statements:

1) American news media tend to "overplay" negative news about other countries.

2) The flow of news between developed and developing/underdeveloped countries should be equal and balanced.

3) American news media tend to portray other countries in a stereotypical way.

4) Training of American foreign correspondents is not adequate for them to be competent in foreign news reporting.

5) American news media should use more news stories supplied by foreign news agencies.

6) An international body should be established to ensure that the flow of news between the developed and developing nations is balanced and the content is fair.

The issues surrounding the NWIO debate were certainly more complex and far-reaching, dealing with inequality of news and information flow, global traffic of television programming, common use of communication technology, distribution of resources, and so on (e.g., Masmoudi, 1979). The six items represented the core arguments about international news flow most relevant to the current performance and future practice of American news media. In the questionnaire, the NWIO debate at Unesco was never mentioned to avoid any cuing effect as to the purpose of the survey. The evaluation of the six statements was based on a five-point scale, with 1 representing "strongly agree" and 5 meaning "strongly disagree."

As mentioned earlier, the study also attempted to determine what influenced editors' responses to the issues raised in the NWIO debate as represented by the six statements. A number of internal and external variables measured at the individual,

organizational, and social level were considered. At the individual level, editors were asked of their interest in foreign news (5-point scale, from "not at all interested" to "very interested"), their years of working experience, political leanings (7-point scale, from "extremely liberal" to "extremely conservative"), college training (5-point scale, from "none at all" to "a great deal") in foreign language, political science/international relations, and journalism/communication, foreign travel and residence for professional purpose, and attendance of seminars or presentations sponsored by a foreign insititution in the United States. At the organizational level, four variables were included: the size of newspaper circulation, number of wire services subscribed to, number of pages devoted to foreign news coverage, and number of foreign news staff. Figures for the first two variables were taken from the data listed in the 1987 yearbook and the last two came from editors' answers in the survey. At the social level, one variable was considered: city population. The data were taken from City and County Data Book, 1983.

Results

The 279 respondents came from all parts of the country, showing no sign of geographic bias. Moreover, on a number of internal and external factors (e.g., circulation, city population, market and organizational characteristics of the newspapers), no significant differences between respondents and nonrespondents were found (_____, in press).

Table 1 presents the mean ratings for the six statements and the percent difference between editors who agreed (either strongly agree or agree) with each item and those who didn't (either strongly disagree or disagree). A negative sign indicates that editors opposing the statement outnumbered those favoring it. Also, the smaller the difference, the less clear-cut the overall editors' opinions were.

As hypothesized, American newspaper editors responded to the major NWIO news flow issues in a clear pattern. The proposals that attempted to impose structural constraints on the exchange of news between countries with different degree of economic development invited more ojection, while criticism of the way American news media treated other countries encountered less challenge.

The survey data indicated that newspaper editors overwhelmingly objected (M = 4.39, S.D. = 1.08) to the idea that an international body should be established to regulate the flow and coverage of news across national borders. Eight in 10 editors (81.4%) disagreed with such a proposal, suggesting a general objection among newspaper editors to relinguish editorial control and journalistic independence at the international level. This certainly is a reflection of the long cherished principle of a free and independent press in the United States.

Most editors also rejected the NWIO demand that American news media use more news stories supplied by foreign news agencies (M = 3.40, S.D. = 1.04). Their objection to the idea of subscribing to non-American news services, however, was not as

strong as the stand on the international control of news flow. Nearly five in 10 editors (47.8%) opposed while about two in 10 agreed (19.5%), with the remaining uncommitted (32.7%). Unlike the previous statement, the data suggest that as far as American newspaper editors are concerned, there may be room for negotiation in using foreign news services to make news flow more balanced.

The criticism that American news media tended to "overplay" negative news about other countries appeared to be generally unacceptable to the editors (M = 3.30, S.D. = .97). Although slightly more than two in 10 editors (21.4%) believed so, at least four other editors in 10 (45.%) expressed otherwise, with the rest of the editors (33.7%) showing no particular inclination toward the charge. Likewise, editors also opposed (M = 3.25, S.D. = 1.12) the demand for an equal and balanced news flow between developed and developing/underdeveloped countries. Those who rejected the claim (44.6%) almost outnumbered those favoring it (23.4%) by a 2 to 1 margin. The finding appears to underline Merrill's (1981, p. 155) statement that "to Western journalists it is naive to expect the world to have a balanced flow of news." It should be noted, however, that compared to other issues the editors' responses seemed to vary more (as reflected by the relatively large S.D.) on this item, suggesting a sense of uncertainty on the part of editors as a group.

The editors were evenly divided (M = 3.05, S.D. = .94) on the statement that training of American foreign correspondents is inadequate for them to be competent in foreign news reporting.

Less than one third of them (31.0%) refuted such a claim while nearly the same number of editors (24.6%) consented. Most of them (44.4%), however, did not lean toward either direction. The fact that many newspapers in this country do not have a foreign correspondents perhaps makes it difficult for the editors to evaluate such an assertion.

The only issue receiving more support among the editors (M = 2.94, S.D. = 1.03) dealt with a technical aspect of American journalism: stereotypes in media coverage of foreign countries. Almost four in 10 editors (38.1%) acknowledged that U.S. news media tended to portray other countries in a stereotypical way, only three in 10 (30.5%) disagreed, and the rest (31.3%) remained neutral. The finding offered limited evidence that most American newspaper editors shared with the NWIO charge of stereotyped treatment of foreign nations.

What then affects editors' responses to the various issues raised in the NWIO debate? Because of the complexity and relevancy of the issues involved, the canonical correlation analysis was used to simultaneously determine the interrelationships among editors' responses to this set of six statements and the set of 13 multiple independent variables that might affect their views of the NWIO issues.

Using the 13 independent variables noted earlier and the 6 dependent variables in the canonical correlation analysis, one canonical function was extracted from the data. The results are presented in Table 2. In the canonical functions, those variables with a canonical loading of at least .30 in the

predictor and criterion sets were considered to be related to each other. Examination of the loadings shows that, as expected, editors' responses to the various issues were indeed a function of economic constraints, their professional experience and training, and political orientation.

According to the canonical function, those newspaper editors who

+ had more space devoted to foreign news;
+ had less working experience;
+ had more foreign language training; and
+ considered themselves to be more liberal,

tended to agree

+ that American news media should use more news stories supplied by foreign news agencies;
+ that the flow of news between developed and developing/underveloped countries should be equal and balanced; and
+ that American news media tend to portray other countries in a stereotypical way.

In other words, newspaper editors who are liberal, younger in their professional age, and better trained in foreign language and have more news space to work with appear to be more receptive to the demands and accusations raised in the NWIO debate.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study examined how newspaper editors across the United States responded to the six major NWIO issues involving the form and content of news flow at the international level. The findings indicate that most U.S. newspaper editors firmly opposed the attempt to make international news flow equal and balanced. They decisively rejected the idea of having an international body to govern the news traffic between developed and developing countries and mostly resisted the idea of using more news stories provided by foreign news agencies.

Although not as strong as their opposition to the international news control, the editors nevertheless denied the charge that American news media overplayed negative news about foreign countries and also rejected the proposal for an equal and balanced flow of news between nations. The editors as a group, however, were not necessarily adamant in their denials with regard to the criticism concerning the stereotyped treatment of foreign countries by U.S. news media and inadequate training journalists in foreign news coverage. They appeared to be relatively sympathetic to the charges and were more willing to admit the technical deficiency of American news media coverage of foreign countries.

As is apparent, the editors' opposition to the NWIO issues centered mostly around the demands that might alter the free flow structure of news traffic among countries, or that could compromise the independence of the American press free from

external interference in the international communication arena. The idea of a free and independent press clearly constitues a cornerstone of the long valued liberal ideology in the tradition of American journalism, which certainly is incompatible with the more restricted authoritative ideology prevalent among many Third World countries. Moreover, the editors' reluctance to use more news stories provided by foreign news agencies, thus making the international flow more equal and balanced, reflected a distrust toward foreign news services as being propaganda. This is essentially in line with the U.S. official position that the NWIO movement has become a power play for Third World countries to score political points.

The observation that ideology seemed to underlie editors' responses to the NWIO issues became evident when their political orientation, journalistic training and professional experience were found to be related to their views. For one thing, those editors who were liberal with better foreign language training and had space devoted to foreign news coverage tended to be more responsive to the demand for an equal and balanced news flow. This, of course, represents an internationalist perspective at the individual and organizational level.

The NWIO debate has been characterized as "high politics" in international communication in that the central issue could be reduced to a clash between ideology and technology (Lee, 1989). The findings in this study suggest that international efforts, especially any organized and institutionalized endeavor, to make news flow "equal and balanced" is likely to face continued

resistence from the American news media that have for years dominated the world's "free marketplace of ideas." Without the American blessing and active involvement, both from the government in general and from the news media in particular, the New World Information Order movement, if it ever revives, is prone to generate more heat than light in international political communication.

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Table 1: Editors' View of Issues Involved in New World Information Order Debate

Issues#	Mean ratings*	SD	% of difference+	N
a. International body	4.39	1.08	-72.5%	279
b. Use of foreign news services	3.40	1.04	-28.3	272
c. Overplay of negative news	3.30	.97	-23.6	276
d. Equal and balanced news flow	3.25	1.12	-21.2	265
e. Inadequate training	3.05	.94	- 5.4	252
f. Stereotyped coverage	2.94	1.03	7.6	278

The complete items are as follows:

a. An international body should be established to ensure that the flow of news between developed and developing nations is balanced and the content is fair.

b. American news media should use more news stories supplied by foreign news agencies.

c. American news media tend to "overplay" negative news about other countries.

d. The flow of news between developed and developing/underdeveloped countries should be equal and balanced.

e. Training of American foreign correspondents is not adequate for them to be competent in foreign news reporting.

f. American news media tend to portray other countries in a stereotypical way.

* The mean rating was based on a 5-point scale. A "1" represented "strongly agree" while a "5" meant "strongly disagree." Therefore, the larger the means in the table, the stronger the editors disagreed with the statement.

+ Entries represent percent difference between those who agreed with the statement and those who didn't. A negative sign indicates the editors' opposition to the statement.

Table 2: Factors Affecting Editors' Responses to the NWIO Issues

PREDICTOR VARIABLES	Function
Newspaper circulation	.02
City population	-.20
Number of wire services subscribed to	.25
Number of pages devoted to foreign news	.34
Number of foreign news staff	-.11
Years of working experience	-.36
Editor's interest in foreign news	.07
Journalism/communication training	.04
Foreign language training	.54
Political science training	.15
Foreign seminars attendance in U.S.	-.28
Visit abroad	-.02
Editor's political leanings	-.51
CRITERION VARIABLES	
International body	.19
Use of foreign news services	-.81
Overplay of negative news	-.23
Equal and balanced news flow	-.50
Inadequate training	-.14
Stereotyped coverage	-.37

Canonical correlation = .48; Squared canonical correlation = .23; Wilks F = 1.76, $p < .001$; Redundancy: dependent variables = 4.36%, given the independent variables.